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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, social psychology has conceptualized sex and gender as subject variables with sex as a biological substrate and gender as a sociocultural consequence of sex. These ideas rest on the assumption of two distinct biological categories. However, gender is better thought of in dialectical rather than oppositional terms. Gender is both internal (traits, beliefs, personality) and external (roles and social organization). One aspect of gender cannot be isolated but must be studied in relation to the sex/gender system, which represents a social, psychological, biological, economic, and cultural totality. From a feminist theoretical perspective, gender becomes the starting point of analysis, focusing on the sex/gender system and how it produces sexed and gendered individuals. Social psychology from a feminist perspective would examine sex and gender within their specific cultural-historical meanings. Research methodologies must also assume a relational orientation, rather than the traditional laboratory-based experimental designs. Sex differences must be put within a theoretical framework connecting individual behavior with the structural arrangement of gender. Social psychology can provide the point of interconnection between external social structures and individual experience, thus providing a synthesis between the study of gender and feminist theory. (BL)

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Social Psychology and Gender:
A New Direction Through Feminist Theory

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Social Psychology and Gender:
A New Direction Through Feminist Theory

This presentation arose from my efforts to resolve my schizophrenia regarding my commitments to the discipline of social psychology and to feminist theory. In trying to reconcile these two aspects of my identity, as well as the demands of these two approaches, I've had to confront the dilemma of whether, if and how these two parts of myself can happily coexist. My presentation today is primarily a thought-piece about the places where the social psychology of gender and feminist theory can learn from each other. Specifically, I want to address: 1) the different ways to conceptualize gender within social psychological theory and research; 2) the possible contributions of feminist theory to social psychology as a whole and to the study of gender in particular; and 3) conversely, the possible contributions of social psychology to an interdisciplinary body of feminist theory.

To begin with, a conceptual confusion abounds in the social psychological study of gender. What is gender? What is the connection between sex and gender? Where does the biological end and the social begin? Where do we locate sex and gender? Are they characteristics possessed by and within individuals? Social psychology has most often taken this approach in sex differences research, with sex (meaning maleness and femaleness) and gender (meaning masculinity and femininity) conceptualized as subject

variables. Sex and gender are differentiated with sex as the biological substrate and gender as the social-cultural consequence of sex. Unger (1979b) has proposed this distinction between sex and gender. On the one hand is sex as an independent variable or subject variable. On the other hand is sex as a stimulus variable for a social label, which is gender. In this way gender can be seen as a dependent variable, the result of classification based on biological categories.

Yet these ideas still rest on the assumption of two distinct biological categories. Others, such as Kessler and McKenna (1977), have challenged the innateness of biological divisions of male and female. Using an ethnomethodological approach and the study of transsexuals, they demonstrate the social-cultural processes of sex categorization and the process of "learning how to do gender" independent of one's biological characteristics. Thus, rather than a naturalistic view of sex and gender, both can be seen as social constructions into dualistic categories, which are then enacted into social arrangements. Furthermore, the feminist critique of sex and gender as social categories highlights the power and status differences involved in our social arrangements of gender. For instance, Henley (1977) claims that sex differences are really differences in power, and Eagly (1981) demonstrates sex differences to be differences in status.

It seems to me that we need to think of gender in dialectical, rather than oppositional, terms. That is, gender is both

internal and external. Gender is something that we carry around in our heads, such as in gender identity and our beliefs and expectations about traits and behaviors appropriate to each gender. This level would correspond to Unger's (1979a) view of sex as a relational and self-fulfilling variable. But, gender is also a form of social organization (Thorne, 1978; Goffman, 1977) in which individuals participate. The social organization of gender ranges from different bathrooms for each gender, and male and female shirts differing on which side they button, to a sexually divided labor force, where women are paid 59 cents for every $1.00 men earn.

So, gender is internal when we talk about traits, beliefs and personality and gender is external when we talk about roles and social structural arrangements. Clearly, then, isolating one aspect of gender only gives us an incomplete picture of what Gayle Rubin (1975) termed the sex/gender system. The sex/gender system is a social, psychological, biological [1] , economic and cultural totality, where one sphere is not the ultimate cause of gender. The social organization of a sex/gender system produces psychologically sexed and gendered people (Lorber, Coser, Rossi,

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[1] I include biology here, yet I don't discuss the controversial, and in my mind meaningless, question of "how much biology?" Feminist theorists have often reacted to biological determinists who attempt to define the limits of human potential based on biology by taking a position of nearly denying the biological realm. I do consider biology as a reality within the sex/gender system. Yet, I believe that biology is always part of a social system and never inseparable from culture. Thus, nothing is "natural" -- or everything is! There is no untouched, presocial biological essence of gender.

Chodorow, 1981). Thus, primacy placed on one part of the system, such as psychological manifestations of gender, often does so in isolation from the operations of the sex/gender system at different levels. How can this view of the social organization of a sex/gender system be utilized within social psychology?

Here is where feminist theory provides a needed new direction for social psychological research on gender. Feminist critiques of psychology as a male-dominated discipline and of psychology as an ideology of male domination have been around for a while (Weisstein, 1970). But feminist theory has made little impact on our theoretical and methodological frameworks. That is, the identity of one as a "feminist theorist" as a specialty within psychology has not yet been legitimated. [2] The label of feminist is seen as indicative of a statement of value or advocacy, which is considered incompatible with the supposed value-neutral stance of science. As Parlee (1979) notes, "the evidence is fairly compelling that the feminist perspective is actively excluded from the mainstream" (p. 129).

What is lost from our frameworks by exclusion of a feminist theoretical perspective? Feminist theory [3] takes as its main

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[2] I might add here that I'm not sure how much legitimacy within the mainstream is our goal, but rather a fundamental change within the discipline. The basic question I'm grappling with in this paper is how much is the discipline of psychology compatible with a feminist theoretical approach. Given the current structure of our discipline, they may be fundamentally incompatible.

[3] What follows is my reading of feminist theory, which is in reality a plurality of liberal, radical, socialist, Marxist, lesbian, cultural and, even of late, conservative approaches.

point of departure the conceptual category of a sex/gender system, analogous to the mode of production as the main category of analysis within Marxist theories. That is, gender is the starting point of analysis, rather than being a variable added onto an already self-contained analysis. Further, a feminist theoretical focus on the sex/gender system necessitates a grounding within context, and connects with other criticisms of social psychological research as devoid of context and as ahistorical. Feminist theory focuses on how a particular social system produces sexed and gendered individuals and the consequences of the enactment of gender. Its value for social psychology lies precisely in that it takes as the center of analysis what is taken as given within social psychology -- the social organization of a sex/gender system. While psychology takes sex and gender as "facts," feminist theory provides a context in which sex and gender are not self-evident, but are examined within their specific cultural-historical meanings.

What place do psychological studies of gender have within an interdisciplinary feminist theory? I doubt that most studies using gender as a subject variable, such as those published in JPSP, are of use to an interdisciplinary feminist theorist. The traditional methodology of social psychology is most compatible with a view of gender as internal to the individual, as a subject variable. Here is where the debate on feminist methodology is relevant. The methods most legitimated within our discipline, i.e., laboratory-based experimental research, are not conducive

to a view of sex/gender as a social system. Thus, the debate about methods is directly connected to the debate about the nature of the beast we study, that is gender. Indeed, I would claim that psychology, as well as all science modeled on a physical science ideal, is possessed of a gender itself. The scientific method as structured, with a strict separation between subject and object of investigation, arises from a primarily male experience of autonomy and separation between self and other (Keller,1978). Psychological conceptualizations of gender are usually in terms of frozen, static oppositions in order to describe differences. Just as we can take a relational view of gender (Chodorow, 1980) as part of a social and historical process, so too we can reshape our methods of inquiry to look at relational and intersubjective processes within a social and historical framework.

In many ways this debate about how to study gender within social psychology is analogous to the debate over traits versus situations, where now clearly the most reasonable approach is that of the interactionist. The debate over gender is further parallel to the critique which Jim Jones (in press) has made of the study of race within social psychology. Race, like gender, is a socially defined category, which, also like gender, is confounded with class (i.e., women in general and black women and men are more likely to be poor in this country). These social categories are not amenable to study as variables within the confines of the experimental technology of social psychology. Sub-

jects can't be randomly assigned to sex or race as conditions and differences within the categories of race and sex are often greater than mean difference between categories. Jones calls for a cultural view of race, looking at the relevant dimensions of cultural experiences in which to frame research on race.

In the same way, the feminist theory of a sex/gender system can frame our data from social psychological research on gender. For a case in point I turn to Alice Eagly's (1978) painstaking and path-breaking meta-analysis on sex differences and influenceability. Eagly's review found methodological artifacts within conformity research, low statistical power to the findings of greater female conformity, and a historical change with fewer studies after 1970 finding evidence of greater female conformity. Yet when she divided studies by type of design, and compared non-interactional persuasion studies with group pressure situations to conform, she did find evidence that women conform more than men in group situations. What do we make of these data? First is to remember all the criticisms of the sex differences approach. The unbalanced focus on difference leads to a neglect of sex similarities and to a focus on mean differences rather than on the greater overlap between groups, and numerous other criticisms which have been articulated elsewhere (Jacklin, 1979; Thorne, 1978). Yet if we frame this finding of a sex difference within a comprehensive theory of gender, we move beyond the mere labeling of a behavior, in this case conformity, as masculine or feminine.

To do so, we need to put the sex difference within a theoretical framework connecting an individual behavior with the social structural arrangement of gender. For instance, one useful framework is Nancy Chodorow's (1978) work examining the social organization of mothering. Chodorow explains women's greater relationality and interpersonal orientation as an outgrowth of the psychodynamic processes of separation and individuation within a family structure where women are primarily responsible for parenting. She uses psychoanalytic theory to connect the social structural arrangement of the sexual division of labor both within and without the family to the personality development of traits, behaviors and desires specific to each gender. Using this approach we can make a connection between the finding of a sex difference within a laboratory setting, that is the different ways males and females generally react to group pressure situations, and the specific social structural context in which this sex difference is produced, that is the structure of family and work.

If looked at just as a sex difference, we, and our colleagues, tend to take a normative approach. That is, women conform more than men and there's something wrong with that. It's indicative of a deficit in women (and we can imagine self-help programs and workshops and a whole developing industry designed to lessen women's "over conformity"). If framed within the context of the social structural arrangements producing gender, however, we can interpret this apparent sex difference as part of a

social arrangement of gender where women tend to be more relationally oriented than men. There's some good things arising from this social arrangement, such as women's greater nurturing capabilities, and there's some undesirable things, such as the development of nurturing qualities at the expense of agency and autonomy. Yet the point here is that if we only take an internal view of gender, we see sex differences in terms of individual deficits rather than as the differential psychological products of a sex/gender system. This framing of a finding of sex differences could also be applied to Carol Gilligan's (1982) work on women's moral decision making. Women tend to view moral dilemmas contextually, in terms of relationships of self with other, rather than a strict separation of rights versus wrongs. This echos the same theme of women's greater relationality arising in connection with a social structure of family and work arrangements.

Finally, I contend that while feminist theory insists on a needed context for the study of gender, that of the sex/gender system, social psychology provides a needed perspective for feminist theory, that of the interface between individual and social structure. Social psychology can be described as that point of interconnection between external social structures, such as race, class and gender, and individual experience, such as consciousness, personality and cognition (House, 1977). This disciplinary perspective is completely compatible with a dialectical view of gender as both internal and external arising from a

social system of organization.

Besides calling for a dialectical view of gender and likening the sex/gender system theoretically to the concept of mode of production, I want to further the analogy between Marxist theory and feminist theory. By the way, I don't find the analogy gratuitous. How many Marxist theorists are legitimated within psychology any more than feminist theorists? What we need for a feminist theory of gender is what Das Kapital did for class. By that I mean a detailed chronicling of how gender both is experienced by individuals at a psychological level and is enacted as a form of social organization in conjunction with race, class and age in specific cultural and historical settings. Social psychology can provide one vantage point in this project -- that of the intersection between individual experience and social structure. I see this as the place of synthesis for a social psychological study of gender and feminist theory.

Returning to my quandary at the outset of my talk, I remain optimistic that my double personality as social psychologist and feminist theorist can be fused. Social psychological research on gender, if placed within the broader context of the sex/gender system, provides a unique contribution to feminist theory. The social psychology of gender can be read as a recording of our cultural beliefs and expectations regarding gender. That is, our hypotheses, such as women are more conforming than men, women are less aggressive than men, etc., embody our cultural ideology regarding gender. Research on gender often verifies what it is

our culture assumes to be true. What we need to do is look underneath the assumption, at where it comes from, at what it reveals about our culture and our beliefs about gender, and place those beliefs within a wider social context.

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